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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP:AMACDONALD AND INR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/27/2019
TAGS: PGOV KDRG CASC PREL YM
SUBJECT: SALEH PRESSES FOR MEETING WITH OBAMA

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (S/NF) On June 27, President Saleh urged the Ambassador to hurry preparations for a state visit to Washington, suggesting it would help remove obstacles impeding the transfer of Yemeni GTMO detainees to Saudi custody. On internal issues, Saleh dismissed concern over unrest in Yemen's southern governorates, and seemed confident of his government's ability to keep the Houthi conflict in the north tamped down. In contrast to the ROY's public position, he conceded the likelihood that al-Qaeda rather than Houthi rebels was behind the recent abduction of aid workers in Sa'ada. Ed Summary.

Meeting with President Obama

¶2. (S/NF) President Saleh reiterated to the Ambassador on June 27 his desire to visit Washington in order to meet with President Obama. The Ambassador noted that the consensus in Washington was that the appropriate time for the presidents to meet would be once the transfer of Yemeni detainees in Guantanamo to the Saudi rehab program was underway. "If you speed up preparations for my visit, we can speed up preparations for the detainees' return," said Saleh. Earlier in the meeting, Saleh reiterated his willingness to have the Yemeni detainees placed in the Saudi rehabilitation program but noted that Saudi King Abdullah had expressed opposition to the idea. He added that Prince Mohamed bin Naif and Minister of Interior HRH Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz support the plan, however, and will continue to work to persuade the King. The Ambassador told the President that regardless of the state of play with the Saudis, the Obama Administration, and the President himself, was grateful for his willingness to have the detainees transferred to the Saudi program.

¶3. (S/NF) Saleh then unveiled a new proposal that the returning detainees be housed in the former U.S. Embassy in the old city of Sana'a. The building, which is now owned by tourism conglomerate Universal Group, is located in the heart of the capital and is being converted into a boutique hotel. Saleh immediately picked up the phone and called Alwan al-Shaibani, the Chairman of Universal Group, and asked how soon the renovation would be complete. Saleh suggested that the Ambassador tour the building as soon as possible. (Comment: It seems unlikely that Saleh was entirely serious about the idea. The location, in the heart of a congested area, would be difficult to secure. The suggestion is probably more demonstrative of the President's flamboyance than any real effort to find a solution to the problem of

locating a secure facility for the returning detainees. End Comment.)

No Danger in the South

¶4. (S/NF) The Ambassador then asked for the President's assessment of recent developments in Yemen, noting concern at senior levels of the USG over the multiple challenges facing the regime. Saleh said that there was "no danger" in the south, merely the same voices expressing the same discontent from 1994. Saleh asserted that there is an ongoing dialogue with the southerners and that they will be allowed to express their views. He clarified, however, that the ROYG would not tolerate violence, sabotage or language that is "against unity." Saleh asserted that most of the Yemeni citizens in the south support unity and that those who did not had only "a few websites, Al Jazeera and some telephones." The Ambassador pointed out the recent events in Tehran have shown a disenfranchised population with telephones and the internet can have a profound impact.

¶5. (S/NF) Saleh asserted that the Southern Movement had staged a demonstration and killed people in order to blame their deaths on the ROYG. He also accused daily newspaper al-Ayyam of "spreading a culture of hatred." He added that by preventing al-Ayyam from publishing, the ROYG had stopped "75 percent" of the unrest. The Ambassador reminded Saleh of the USG's "great concern" about any steps that obstruct the independent media.

Sa'ada

¶6. (S/NF) Saleh said the ROYG is committed to resolving the Houthi crisis without returning to war. He asserted, however, that Abdulmalik al-Houthi, the leader of the rebellious movement, wants war. He complained that Houthi rebels had killed two Yemeni soldiers and captured 24 others.

The 24 hostages were returned but not the construction equipment that they had with them, according to Saleh.
(Note: The return of the 24 military hostages was reported in Yemen's media. End Note.)

¶7. (S/NF) On the issue of the kidnapped/murdered German, British and Korean aid workers, Saleh said there were two likely scenarios: first that it was a terrorist act committed by al-Qaeda and second, that it was committed by Houthis and was related to drug-smuggling activities. The Ambassador noted that the al-Qaeda theory seemed most compelling. Saleh responded by noting that he has directed ROYG security services to move against al-Qaeda leaders if the opportunity presents itself. The Ambassador noted that Embassy elements are currently cooperating with the National Security Bureau on this effort. Saleh asked that this cooperation accelerate, saying that the terrorists had received "orders from Afghanistan" to attack either Saleh's plane or his motorcade.

Salah's Demeanor

¶8. (S/NF) While Saleh appeared slightly more wound up than usual, he did not/not appear particularly distracted or otherwise unable to focus on the issues at hand, as some reports lately have suggested. The only behavior he displayed that appeared at all different was that his interventions were delivered in extended statements that made it difficult for his official interpreter to keep up.

Comment

¶9. (S/NF) Saleh made it clear once again that he is exceedingly eager to meet with President Obama. It is likely that he believes the prestige of such a meeting would increase his political capital, allowing him to better handle the various crises that beset his country. While this

meeting might be appropriate in the foreseeable future, we do not/not believe the invitation should be extended as long as Saleh continues to temporize in the face of Yemen's multiple crises. End Comment.

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